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CARL & MARILYNN THOMA FOUNDATION

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## Thoma Foundation Awards \$200,000 to Empower Schools



### **The two-year grant supports the pilot of the LeadRural Fellowship in Texas, a new locally driven effort to drive innovation in rural education**

The Carl & Marilyn Thoma Foundation, a private family foundation headquartered in Dallas-Fort Worth with additional offices in Santa Fe and Chicago, has awarded \$200,000 to Empower Schools. The two-year grant funds the pilot of the LeadRural Fellowship—a coordinated and intentional effort to identify, cultivate, and support rural leaders and to give those leaders the ideas, resources, network, and partners to be successful in designing and implementing new solutions in their communities. The Thoma grant will support many aspects of the LeadRural Fellowship experience, including site visits, workshops, an annual retreat, recruitment and selection materials, development of programming, and technical assistance.

“We need strong, empowered leaders with diverse perspectives and experiences in order to foster thriving communities and equitable access to high-quality education in rural areas,” said Holly Harrison, Director of the Thoma Foundation. “As funders, we’re still new to education and we’re also excited by the opportunity to learn alongside the first LeadRural cohort as they are exposed to new solutions and resources and explore how to most effectively implement change in their schools and communities.”

LeadRural is the brainchild of Garrett Landry (Steady State Impact Strategies) and Brett Alessi (Empower Schools). Empower Schools has already seen promising early results in the rural space through the creation of the Rural School Innovation Zone (RSIZ), a partnership amongst three rural school districts and five higher education institutions, and regional workforce partners in South Texas. While retaining their unique identities, these smaller, rural districts can offer their students expanded access to college and career opportunities that no single district could offer on their own. In three years, the RSIZ has quadrupled the percentage of students completing a dual-credit course and nearly closed the gap with the state in the percentage of college-ready students. Now, Empower Schools and Steady State Impact look to build on their track record with the LeadRural Fellowship.

“We are inspired by the work we have seen happening in rural communities across Texas,” said Brett Alessi, co-founder and partner with Empower Schools. “We have been able to pull together a phenomenal group of leaders for the inaugural LeadRural Fellowship and are excited to work alongside the fellows to support their vision for innovation in their communities.”

LeadRural has already begun their inaugural Fellow cohort, which includes three superintendents, four district leaders & principals, and five ESC/nonprofit leaders. These twelve Fellows, drawn from across the state, are each ideally positioned to improve their local education system upon the conclusion of the fellowship. Over the fellowship year, the Fellows will gain proficiency in the following subjects: knowledge of emerging and established best practices, and capacity to design and implement state-aligned initiatives with sustainable public



funding streams. Along the way, Fellows will have access to a strong group of technical assistance providers who will advise and support them with the design and implementation of strategies and tactics aligned with local needs as well as statewide education goals.

“I am constantly looking for ways to support our rural school and community to grow and thrive,” said Dr. Marisa Chapa, Superintendent of Benavides ISD and one of the inaugural LeadRural Fellows. “I think there are innovative things happening all over rural Texas, I love the idea of learning about these and taking them back to my community.”

LeadRural Advisory Board Member, Kelty Garbee, who serves as the Executive Director of Texas Rural Funders, added, “This group of Fellows – and future LeadRural Fellows – has the potential to be an important voice for rural education in Texas – and beyond.”

LeadRural will be featured at the Texas Association of School Administrators (TASA) Midwinter Conference in Austin at the end of January.

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